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H PLEASE PASS TO HIRC STAFF: DOUG ANDERSON

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TAGS: PREL EAID FJ CH XV

SUBJECT: FIJI FOREIGN MINISTER AND CODEL HYDE: U.S., UK,
CHINA, AUSTRALIA AND THE SOUTH PACIFIC

REF: SUVA 323

Classified By: Amb. Dinger, Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (C/NF) Per reftel, HIRC Chairman Henry Hyde's CODEL visited Nadi, Fiji, August 15-17. Other delegation members included Congressmen Rohrabacher (R-CA), Faleomavaega (D-AS), Watt (D-NC), and Flake (R-AZ). During the meeting with Fiji Foreign Minister Tavola and MFA CEO Mataitonga, Congressman Faleomavaega asked if Fiji is concerned that the United States has withdrawn from the South Pacific. Tavola said there is a widespread perception that, after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. withdrew from the region. Tavola suggested recent UK retrenchments, including withdrawal of its assistance organization from the South Pacific, have left a similar impression. Tavola said the result has been creation of a "void which is being filled by China and Taiwan." Tavola argued Australia does not have the capacity to "counter" that trend. Tavola and Mataitonga suggested the "evident expanding Chinese presence" may be benign at the beginning, but it threatens "erosion of democracy in time."

¶2. (C/NF) Mataitonga proposed that visits like CODEL Hyde need to be repeated - there is no substitute for face-to-face, high-level contact. Tavola concluded that portion of the meeting by noting that he and Ambassador Dinger are working hard, and will continue to work hard, to improve contacts and energize the relationship. In addition, through visits, trade, and other means, the U.S. needs to step up its engagement with the Pacific.

Comment

¶3. (C/NF) We have heard expressions of concern before from Mataitonga about China's expanding role in the South Pacific. Cong. Faleomavaega's query brought forth Tavola's view that China's rise relates to USG decisions in the mid-1990s for USAID and USIA to close down their South Pacific offices. Tavola volunteered the comment about Australia not having the weight to "counter" that trend. We pointed out to CODEL Hyde that, contrary to the mid-1990s, Embassy Suva is now growing, at least by a bit, with an environmental hub to start in September and with prospects for a regional PD position, an expanded DAO operation, and a Legatt presence. We would welcome further high-level USG visits to Fiji to foster the dialogue Tavola and Mataitonga so strongly urge.

DINGER